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Commentary - Feminist psychology – post-structuralism, class and maternal subjectivities: Where are we and where should we go next?

Shields' (1975) paper challenges the 'truths' presented in sex difference psychological research over the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so the notion of the 'maternal instinct' is interrogated and is persuasively argued to be imbued with androcentric values that serve to disempower, regulate and hierarchically position women as lesser and 'othered' vis a vis men, thereby shoring up the social values of the day. This present commentary aims to consider how some of the last 30 years of feminist thinking within psychology has taken Shields' seminal work in new directions, in particular, towards an understanding of how the socially situated meanings around the 'maternal instinct' shape working-class maternal subjectivities.

Shields (1975) argues that the functionalist US movement produced "a prototypic psychology of women" (p, 739) where women were considered as subordinate to men. This early emphasis on the functional, biological foundations of 'maternal instinct' produced a construction of the purpose of female 'nature'. In this work, the 'maternal instinct' was seen as a complex but ordered system of instincts characterised by a number of emotions including, and primarily, "emotional nature" (p. 740). The maternal instinct was considered to be a direct result of reproductive biology and was seen to lead to emotional prowess, lesser mental capacities, and an inability to consider more complex subjects, leaving women essentially predisposed to mothering. However, Shields presents the strong case that a focus on such 'differences' served to assist in legitimising the status quo of power inequalities. In sum, Shields argues that any further study of 'difference' should start with a focus on such power and inequity to avoid the bolstering of problematic, hierarchically organised 'social order'.

Work by feminists responded to Shields' challenge, first, by shifting the focus to the examination of how socially shared and sanctioned meanings of the 'maternal instinct' police and regulate women's practices, bodies and, second, by re-locating

such 'instincts' as part of dominant ideologies around 'good' and 'bad' mothering that substantiate the unequal power positioning of women. Therefore questions have been asked about the gender hierarchy, how this affects women, their 'psychology' and their lives, what can be done to overcome such inequality and any consequential negative impact on women's 'psychology'. Questions need to also focus on the role of government and governing systems (such as psychology as a science) have in these processes. In a large body of this work, the emphasis underscores Shields' point that questions about the psychology of women are social and ignoring this risks obscuring the ways in which women's lives are shaped by power relations embedded within social conceptualisations of gender.

At the time of Shields' seminal work, other scholars were beginning to flag the importance of 'the woman' question' as a social one (pg. 739). For example, Rich (1977) asked us to focus on the institutional locations of power within a gendered hierarchy (such as legal systems that construct what is and isn't a legitimate mother) and how these create normative expectations around the practices and standards of motherhood which, in turn, prevail to disempower women. She argued "we do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood" (pg. 275). Similarly, within psychology, Russo challenged what she named the 'Motherhood Mandate' (1979). This 'mandate' echoes the early functionalist logic described by Shields' by positioning the need to be a mother as being central to being a female adult and therefore compelling women to adhere to the primacy of this role. However, for Russo, this mandate does not emanate from an 'instinct' located inside our bodies and minds (as with Darwinian thinking). Instead, Russo suggests it is a socially and culturally institutionalised set of ideas and practices that produce a 'psychological' necessity for women to reproduce or risk being considered unnatural, selfish and therefore a 'bad' woman. Here then, we have feminist thinking around mothering that relocates the 'maternal instinct' from the functional essence of females to an institutionally situated set of ideas that operate to render women unequal to men, and some women as 'bad' mothers. Importantly, Russo argued that this centrality of motherhood (or mandate) is both heterosexist and classist, allowing us to consider the impact of such dominant

ideologies on women, their identities and their lives according to the social standing of those women.

Starting with the late 1980s, concerns embedded in Shields' paper around the need to study social and cultural conceptualisations of the masculine and feminine were taken in new directions in feminist post-structuralist work where the analysis of intersectional identities became central. For some feminist thinkers, who have social class as a central concern, this has meant, first, theorising how maternal identities located in gender and class categories coincide with poststructuralist argument (e.g. Butler, 1999) and, second, following the work of Foucault and Derrida to understand the location and functions of power to shape and regulate the classed, maternal subject (see Weedon, 1987). The shared concern of feminism and post structuralism is an insistence upon the social and historical specificity of motherhood, rejecting the possibility of truth and objectivity, and considering knowledge as socially constructed, transient, unstable, and closely aligned with power. Therefore, rather than discovering 'truths', feminist post-structuralist thought concerns itself with the disruption of dominant knowledges.

Accordingly, some theorists have followed Shields' goal of seeking to expose the myth of constructions such as the 'maternal instinct', while following other earlier work (such as Rich, 1977 and Russo, 1979) that began to relocate such instincts as state sanctioned ideologies that serve a particular purpose. Within this work, ideas (theorised as discourses) create a production of 'truth' around the existence of the 'maternal instinct' that serve to shape maternal subjectivities (or identities) for women as they engage in the discursive practices which locate themselves as members of the social world (e.g. Davies and Banks 1992; DiQuinzio, 1993; Phoenix, 1991). This body of work is interested in how maternal subjectivities draw upon discourse around what Shields describes as "a prototypic psychology of women" (p. 739) and how this process of extraction serves to both bolster and regulate social inequities *between* women. This work begins with the premise that women's bodies and the categories and concepts through which we understand them are historically, culturally and politically specific constructions (Gergen, 1985; Henriques, 1984;

Kitzinger, 1987). Moreover, some examples of this work (e.g. Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd, 1991) have allowed us to understand how discursive constructions of the 'maternal subject' become situated in dichotomies such as the natural versus unnatural mother – the latter of whom has been variously constructed as deviant and pathological in the lack of "correct care" they provide for their children. These construction often serve to privilege and therefore normalise white, middle-class women and in, in turn, 'other' and derogate women considered to be working-class. In addition, this othering of such women shores up political, social and economic inequities through the denial of social housing, medical and social care policy and practice and a pervasive derogation of them, their bodies and their lives (Weber, 1998).

To highlight the recent, new directions of feminist work on the maternal subject, I will now draw on some work that explores discursive intersections of working-class and gender identities in the context of mothering. These research studies examine sites where working-class women are written by others and by themselves as deficient, and therefore unnatural, unruly and not respectable mothers). In addition, I will present arguments that enable a consideration of how agentic, discursive practices of survival within this oppressive set of constraining normative constructions allow working-class women to contest such meanings. Finally, I will end with some brief thoughts on how post- structuralist feminist psychologists can move forward from Shields' 1975 work to continue to trouble such harmful constructions of maternal identities.

Meanings around working-class motherhood are continually re-written through popular culture and often echo dominant discourses around what is 'natural', and therefore beneficial for mothering and what is not. While the psychology of the 'maternal instinct' may have moved beyond earlier functionalist accounts that Shields so eloquently describes in her classic paper, the discourse of what constitutes a normal mother is saturated with meaning around the 'right way' and 'the wrong way' to be a mother. Importantly, this so-called 'right way' is imbued with neo-liberalist and middle-class ideals. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) explored intersections of femininity and class through an analysis of British 'make-over' reality TV shows,

arguing that such shows serve to produce and transform 'failing' working-class mothers into idealised, neo-liberal bourgeois (feminine) subjects. Typically, working-class mothers' 'faulty' mothering practices and 'dysfunctional' lifestyles are monitored, scrutinized and held responsible for sabotaging the future health and life chances of their children. In doing so, working-class mothers are presented as antithetical to naturalising discourses which position mothers as primary care givers who are to self-sacrifice and put aside any other motivations that may impede their mothering. In such shows these abject feminine subjects invite the viewer to identify "...against what we must not be", thus fuelling attempts to transform ourselves into the normative bourgeois feminine subject that is the idealised mother (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008, p. 227).

There is also research focusing on the current cultural climate of 'intensive parenting', neoliberalism, and the so-called 'epidemic of obesity' where parents are expected to take responsibility for their children's health, particularly through the provision of a 'healthy' diet. However, this falls disproportionately on mothers, who continue to be afforded a central role a range of academic, particularly psychological, literature on children's eating practices; such responsibility reiterates earlier thinking regarding the necessity of a 'need' for mothers, as women, to care solely for their children. In this current climate, 'caring' requires a singular focus on health and eating. In inter-generational dyad interviews with mothers and daughters from the UK (Author et al.) it was found that providing a healthy diet alone was insufficient to be a 'good' maternal subject; mothers also needed to demonstrate that time and effort had been taken in the preparation of meals by using fresh ingredients. Mothers who failed to do so were positioned as 'lazy' or 'selfish'. However, working-class women are painfully aware of the need to defend themselves against such bourgeois values and the normative ideology around them (Skeggs, 1997). In line with this, the interview data from our research study marginal, resistant talk from working-class mothers around the unfair pressures that these ideals place on women. One example of this in the data was the ways in which participants discussed feelings of anger in response to celebrity chefs and the resource-intensive cooking practices. Angry responses formed part of the construction in marginal resistant talk of the

unrealistic expectations placed on mothers who don't have the money or time to engage in such practices. In addition, the lives of mothers whom the participants regarded as 'posh' and privileged were contrasted with their own lives (for example, as single mothers in full paid work outside the home) and the related constraints or opportunities their contrasting positions impose on/afford them in relation to cooking for a family. Through this potent resistance work, the classed nature of the hegemonic discourse around the 'good' maternal subject is exposed and challenged to enable a way of being that early work by Phoenix and Woollett (1991) so keenly drew our attention to.

The above examples demonstrate the utility of these new directions to understanding the maternal subject by highlighting both the socially located processes that enable working-class mothers to be written by others and by themselves as deficient, and women's engagement in discursive practices of survival which allow them to contest such meanings. Returning to Shields' recommendations, this work has endeavoured to disrupt rather than "play handmaiden" to the "social values" (pg.759) of the day, particularly around womanhood, motherhood and social class. In addition, this work has firmly moved away from the idea of the essentialised location of mothering and its associative practices as a series of 'instincts' at the core of womanhood, to interrogating the truth of such knowledge bases and how such truths serve to position particular women in particular ways while maintaining the social order of the world they are positioned in. We now know that discourses around the 'natural' necessity to mother, together with the intensive, time consuming and self-absorbing ideals of mothering practice, are central not only to the self-definition of middle-class mothers but also to the policing of working-class mothers. However, despite the research presented here, there does continue to be a dearth of such research within feminist psychology; some feminist psychologists have called attention to the need for more attention to issues of social justice, class, privilege, and access to resources, and to the need to listen to poor women (Lott & Bullock, 2001). The majority of the limited research on working-class samples in mainstream psychology, on the other hand, tends to obscure structural inequalities and power differentials by

focussing instead on ways in which these samples *are* psychologically 'deficient' (see Author et al. in press).

Shields drew attention to the need for a recognition of social myth; in order to do this, we need to first, continue to disrupt and interrogate such classed and gendered social myths and, second, strive to erode the propensity for psychology to assist in the maintenance of such inequality. Hence, we call for feminist psychologists to sustain the regard for working-class maternal subjectivities, as this will assist the fight against psychology's propensity to "shut up" and "shut out" working-class women from analyses (Saris and Johnston-Robledo, 2000). In addition, if we are to utilise middle-class samples, we could use this as an opportunity to theoretically scrutinise the production of middle-class maternal subjectivities (e.g. Walkerdine and Lucey 1989) and to deconstruct the 'normalness' of middle-class lifestyles, practices and identities. Lastly, not enough is currently known about how those with more economic power justify the class privilege of their bodies, identities and practices around the maternal subject or about the discursive strategies that they use to maintain and protect their status (Limbert and Bullock 2009). Whilst some research (e.g. Tyler, 2008) has highlighted the role of middle-class fears and anxieties in the construction of the working-class "other", finding out more about the processes of the maintenance and justification of power will potentially provide us with tools in order to challenge and deconstruct the daily normalisation and justification of class privilege and oppression around the maternal subject. The above three suggestions for further directions will keep us fuelled by Shields' revolutionary writing on the 'maternal instinct' and will continue to disturb and expose harmful, socially sanctioned constructions of the maternal subject that disproportionately impede on the lives and possible lives of some of the least social and economically privileged women in our society.



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